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## REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL FACTORS THAT PROLONG THE SYRIAN CRISIS

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“All the roses of the world won’t be enough for Syrian grief.”

*Walid Jumblatt*

The Syrian crisis has entered its fifth year, and there are no signs that the conflict will end soon. On the contrary, international and regional behaviour with respect to the Syrian crisis leaves the impression that the crisis will be a very long - and bloody - one. According to the United Nations, two hundred and twenty thousand Syrians have been killed since the uprising started in March 2011, four million Syrians have fled the country, and seven million Syrians are internally displaced.<sup>1</sup> The economy is shattered, cities and towns have been wiped from the map, chemical weapons have been used multiple times, and yet there are no signs that regional or international actors are willing to intervene to end the crisis.

Enough work has been done on the causes of the Syrian revolt, with little emphasis regarding the reasons behind the prolongation of the war. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to study the reasons behind the prolongation of the Syrian crisis. I identify two sets of factors that prolong the crisis, classified into regional and international factors. At the regional level, the crisis is portrayed as a competition between Iran from one side, and Saudi Arabia and Turkey from another. This competition is based on the need to expand or maintain influence in Syria, with Saudi Arabia aiming at re-claiming Syria into the Arab orbit, while Iran trying its best to preserve the Syrian regime since it serves as an outpost to project its Iranian influence into the Arab Levant. Saudi Arabia and Iran have promoted a religious dimension to the conflict for political purposes, ending up in a regional cleavage of Sunni States vs. the Shiite axis. The former is led by Saudi Arabia and Turkey, supported by the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The latter is composed of Iran and supported by its proxies: Iraqi Shiite militants and Hezbollah from Lebanon.

At the international level, the regional struggle has elevated into a conflict between Russian-Chinese interests from one side and that of the American interests from another. Nevertheless, the two layers of the conflict are related by the dependence of the regional players on Russia and the US. The United States has been a strong ally of the Sunni states in the Middle East, and without them there cannot be a solution to end the war, considering that most of Syria’s population are Sunnis, while the Sunni states need American support to articulate a successful policy to finance and arm the rebel groups. The Shiite bloc led by Iran needs the Russians and Chinese umbrella to block United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions that might jeopardize their interests, and Russia needs the Iranian manpower (boots on the ground) with Russian air-cover to avoid a total collapse of the Syrian regime.

### *The Syrian Crisis*

Inspired by the series of Arab uprisings that started in Tunisia early 2011, the Syrian uprising was sparked spontaneously in the southern city of Daraa where school children were arrested for writing graffiti on their school wall calling for the fall of the regime.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the children were taken by the security forces, beaten, tortured and sexually harassed. The brutality was overseen by Atef Najib, head of the Political Security branch in Daraa.<sup>3</sup> It is said that when tribal leaders from Daraa met with

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Najib to ask for the release of the children, he deliberately told them that by no means could the children be granted freedom for their crime. When one tribal leader took off his *kufiya*, placed it on the table (a tribal custom of threatening to conduct repercussions if no solution is adopted), Najib threw the *kufiya* from the window and followed with curses to the leaders.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the first demonstration of Syrians opposing Asad started on 18 March 2011 on what was known as the Friday of Dignity.<sup>5</sup>

Opposition to Asad spread like wildfire in different cities which organized peaceful demonstrations to demand reforms, but Asad's response was brutal, ordering the military to open fire at demonstrators. After few months of peaceful demonstrations, the Syrian regime pushed the opposition to use weapons against the Syrian army. Units from the Syrian army defected and established the Free Syrian Army. They took refuge in the northern part of Syria and Turkey. When Asad's forces were on the defensive, they used chemical weapons in al-Ghouta, a suburb of Damascus, in August 2013.<sup>6</sup> The inability of the west to respond swiftly to Asad's use of chemical weapons emboldened the brutal crackdown on protestors.<sup>7</sup> This happened less than a week after Obama's declaration that Asad would cross a red line if he used chemical weapons.<sup>8</sup>

In his analysis of the Syrian crisis, David Lesch asserts that the crisis had emerged as a regional cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and a new Middle Eastern cold war at the international level between the U.S and Russia.<sup>9</sup> While I agree on the two levels of the conflict, the regional and international cold war hypothesis is debatable. There is a rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, but it is by no means a cold war; the war is clearly open to escalation and has taken a religious aspect despite the fact that the two countries are acting according to national interests rather than religious belief. At the international level, Russia and China might be willing to amend their position if less pressure was put on their immediate sphere: Russia fears increasing orientation of Eastern Europe towards the west, hence threatening Russia's interest in the region, while China is trying to build its regional hegemony in East Asia. Consequently, both countries have a stake in the Syrian crisis to use it as a bargain chip vis-à-vis the west to secure their interest not in the Middle East, but rather in their immediate sphere.

### *The Regional Dilemma*

The regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia re-emerged to the surface after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. The new political system in Iraq favoured the Shiite majority who aligned themselves with Iran, rendering Saudi Arabia to perceive the outcome of the invasion as an Iranian success in spreading its influence in the Middle East at the expense of Saudi Arabia's regional leadership. In addition, Syria's turn to Iran and its spat with the Arab world following the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri made it critical for Saudi Arabia to re-claim its lost interests in Syria.

### *Iran and the Shiite Bloc*

The alliance between Iran and Syria began soon after the success of the Iranian Revolution in 1979.<sup>10</sup> The interest between the two countries to establish such an alliance was twofold: to help contain the Iraqi regime which was at war with the Iranians in 1980 and hostile to the Syrian Ba'athist branch, and to join forces in order to combat the Israeli influence in Lebanon. From the Iranian perspective, Syria became a safe passage for financial and military support to Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Syria facilitated

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the infiltration of Iranian Revolutionary Guards to train the newly established Hezbollah in 1982.<sup>11</sup> Later, the success of Hezbollah in forcing the Israeli army to withdraw from southern Lebanon in 2000 cemented the relation between Iran and Syria. After 2005, the Arab isolation of the Syrian regime due to the assassination Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri fortified the alliance and made Syria heavily dependent on Iran.

Syria's turning to Iran was a strategic choice made by Bashar al-Asad. He did not hesitate to insult the late Saudi King Abdallah Bin Abdul Aziz in 2006 during the Israeli-Hezbollah war when Asad described Abdallah as being half a man.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, under Bashar, Iranian-Shiite influence was prioritized over a Sunni-Arab one. Thus, a number of local Shiite channels started broadcasting in Syria, lecturing about Shiite Islam and promoting pro-Iranian religious men to media appearances.<sup>13</sup> Some twenty thousand Iranians have been given Syrian citizenship,<sup>14</sup> and economically speaking, Bashar has tied Syria to Iran: Iranian direct investment in Syria was estimated at \$3 billion as of 2008, Iran opened an auto manufacturing plant in Syria with the goal of eventually supplying 40 percent of the Syrian automobile market, and it financed a new fleet of buses and helped build numerous mosques around the country.<sup>15</sup>

Syrian dependency on Iran was a strategic gain for the latter. Syria became a forward operating post and a means for Iran to project power into the Levant.<sup>16</sup> Syria is still the safe passage for Iranian military and financial support not only to Hezbollah, but also to Hamas. Losing Syria meant that Iranian proxies will be weakened, and consequently its influence in the Levant. In addition, the alliance of the two autocratic-oriented regimes aimed also to provide what Moises Naim calls "political technology" for suppressing their people, whereby states exchange information and strategies that deals with preserving authoritarian systems.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, when unrest started to spread in Syria, Iran sent elements of its elite Qods Force to train Syrian forces on strategies to quell protests, skills the Iranians honed when putting down the Green Revolution in 2009.<sup>18</sup> The Syrian regime also imported a special Iranian militia to protect the government and functions beside the Syrian Republican Guard headed by Bashar's brother, Maher Al Asad.<sup>19</sup> Besides that, Iranian proxies in the region started pouring into Syria to support the regime, and on 25 May 2013 the Secretary General of Hezbollah, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, officially announced the role of Hezbollah in fighting the rebels in Syria.<sup>20</sup> Iraq offered Damascus moral support and signed trade deals with the embattled regime,<sup>21</sup> and Iraqi Shiites formed the militant brigade *Abi Al Fadl Al 'Abbas*, and Afghani Shiites from the Hazara tribe to fight alongside the Syrian regime. Economically, Iran is helping Syria defy the UN oil embargo by shipping oil to Syria,<sup>22</sup> sending cash to the regime and stopping the devaluation of the Syrian currency.<sup>23</sup>

Syria's geopolitical position as a safe passage to support Iranian proxies in Lebanon and Palestine, represents a serious motive for Iran to defend the Syrian regime. As William Harris puts it, Iranian involvement in Syria is to make sure that Hezbollah receives its Syrian and Iranian missiles as a deterrent against an Israeli assault on Iranian nuclear facilities.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, "without Damascus, Iran would be shrunk to a defensive position in the Persian Gulf, and even Iraqi Shiite Arabs might look elsewhere."<sup>25</sup> In other words, Syria is geopolitically imperative for Iranian influence in the region.

The Syrian regime survives today mainly because of the material support of Iran and the Russian political umbrella. It is widely believed that the lift of sanctions against Iran would provide further material boost to the Syrian regime and the Shiite axis in the region. However, Turkey, Saudi Arabia

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and their allies have a different perspective towards Syria. This Sunni bloc is providing weapons and finance to the rebels, albeit in smaller quantities than the amount Iran is providing to the Syrian regime. Their stance against Syria is also aimed at clipping Iranian influence in the Middle East.

### *The Sunni Bloc*

The Sunni bloc consists of two main players: Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Qatar has a supportive role, because it does not have the power of projection the Saudis and Turks have. Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates have a minor role in the conflict exclusive to financing a few rebel groups. The problem with this bloc is that it lacks coordination and a coherent policy. Moreover, this bloc is internally divided among itself whereby each country has conflicting interests to the others. Till now, no Turkish-Saudi unified policy towards Syria has been reached, and the support this bloc is providing to the rebels is aimed at preventing their collapse but not their victory. Turkey and Saudi Arabia are wary of each other's influence among the Syrian rebels. Turkey made a common cause with Saudi Arabia in trying to bring about regime change in Damascus by providing sanctuary and funds to the rebels.<sup>26</sup> However, Turkey will not welcome a strong Free Syrian Army associated with Saudi Arabia in its immediate neighbourhood.<sup>27</sup> The last thing Turkey wants is a Wahhabi oriented Sunni neighbour which can disrupt Turkey's internal social fabric.

Beside Turkey's scepticism of Saudi intentions, it is taking its economic interests with Iran into consideration. Turkey and Iran have agreed to expand their bilateral trade agreements to 36 billion USD by 2016, and Iran is the second biggest exporter of oil and gas into Turkey.<sup>28</sup> Marginalizing Iran politically from the Syrian scene may have severe implications for the Justice and Development Party, and an economic crisis in Turkey as a result of Iranian-Turkish divergence of perspective regarding the Syrian civil war might also put the party out of power for the first time in a decade. Hence, we can understand Erdogan's reluctance in orchestrating a covert operation in Syria despite its unique geo-political position to secure no-fly zones, safe zones within Syria, and orchestrate the unification of the Syrian opposition.<sup>29</sup> Needless to say, the Alevi community in Turkey which is overwhelmingly secular and is intimidated by Erdogan's Islamist policies, has taken a staunch stand supporting the Syrian regime.<sup>30</sup> This makes Erdogan mistrustful of the Alevi community, something manifested in May 2013 when a car bomb attack on the Turkish-Syrian border, with Erdogan describing it as an event inspired by Syrian civil war,<sup>31</sup> hinting at the sympathies and possible coordination between the Alevi community and Asad's Alawite regime.

Saudi Arabia for its part is trying to completely eradicate Asad's regime in order to substitute it with a friendly Sunni regime that would not compete with Saudi's influence in Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq. The fall of Asad's regime would mean the end of a hostile regime, would reverse the loss of Iraq, and check Iran's advance into the Levant.<sup>32</sup> For this purpose, the Kingdom is providing financial support to all rebel forces it regards suitable for its anti-Iranian cause.<sup>33</sup> Saudi financial support, along with the Kuwaiti, Emirates, and Qatari financial contribution have been channelled to virtually all the main opposition groups, with a major difference that Saudi Arabia does not finance the Islamic State or the al-Qaeda affiliated al-Nusra.<sup>34</sup> This is another problem that the Sunni bloc is facing, and that is the competition to finance rebel groups who tend to serve the interest of their patrons in the region. Al Nusra receives funds from private donations,<sup>35</sup> and the competition between donors to fund different rebel groups has weakened the armed groups in general and the FSA in particular, which is struggling to survive financially and militarily.

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Diplomatically, Qatar took the lead in opposing Asad's rule when it became the first Arab country to withdraw its ambassador from Damascus in July 2011, and Qatar's Prince contemplated the intervention of Arab troops to hasten Asad's removal,<sup>36</sup> a bold diplomatic move which fell on deaf ears in the Arab League. All the countries in the Sunni bloc lack genuine and audacious initiatives. Despite the enormous amount of money, Saudi ability to project power into Syria remains limited,<sup>37</sup> and the Kingdom is heavily dependent on the U.S. for military action against Syria. When Asad used chemical weapons in August 2013, the Saudis tried to convince Obama to use force against Asad but to no avail. Instead of taking unilateral action under the umbrella of the Arab League, the Saudis, along with the GCC and the Turks are waiting for American blessing. This serves well for Asad and his allies in prolonging the war and attempting to crush the rebellion.

Looking at the conflict in Syria from a regional perspective, the countries taking part are classified as a Shiite axis and a Sunni one. States in the Middle East are giving the conflict a religious dimension to cover their national interests which they believe are at stake. This explains the Sunni motivation for Jihad in Syria against Asad's regime, with a desire to bring Shariah law into post-Asad Syria. As for the Shiites, they are motivating young men from Lebanon, Iraq and Afghanistan to fight for the protection of Shiite religious shrines, like the holy Shrine of Sayida Zainab, with a divine mission to fight Takfiri groups. However, these are political moves aimed at utilizing religion to hide the national and geopolitical interests of Iran and Saudi Arabia. Transcending the factors that contribute to the conflict into the international level, it becomes clear that states in conflict are more oriented to define their interests in terms of realpolitik. Russia, China, and the U.S. do not need to provide a religious, cultural or even humanitarian dimension to protect their interests in Syria, they have enough confidence to define their interests in a political context.

### *The International Perspective: A Bird's Eye View*

At the international level, there are two groups that contribute to the prolongation of the conflict. The first group consists of Russia and China, while the second group consists mainly of the U.S. which seems to be ignoring the situation in Syria in favour of domestic American politics and political action in other parts of the world, such as Cuba and the Pacific.

It is wrong to consider that Russia, China and Iran have identical interests in Syria. For the time being, their interests overlap and are not in conflict, but in the long run, their interest will definitely diverge. Russia and China have been acting together to block American led attempts for a solution. In October 2011, Russia and China vetoed a sanctions resolution condemning Syria.<sup>38</sup> Later on February 4, 2012, both countries vetoed a resolution by the UNSC calling on Asad to step down and stop the violence.<sup>39</sup> The following month they also vetoed a draft resolution by the U.N. Human Rights Council that condemned the crimes committed by the regime,<sup>40</sup> and in July 2012 they vetoed a British draft resolution aimed at punishing the Asad regime with economic sanctions.<sup>41</sup> During the debates, Russia and China closely coordinated their efforts to support the Syrian regime,<sup>42</sup> and both provided military support, financial and technical assistance to the Syrian army to face international sanctions.<sup>43</sup> Finally, in 2014, Russia and China vetoed a U.N. move to refer Asad's crimes in Syria to the International Criminal Court (ICC).<sup>44</sup> The last move was obvious since both countries have been widely criticised by international agencies for human rights violations, and they perceive a move to refer crimes to the ICC

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as a threat to their sovereignty in the future. Recently, Russia has vetoed another UNSC resolution to stop the bombings in Aleppo, making it the fifth time that Russia vetoes resolutions regarding Syria.<sup>45</sup>

The degree of Russian commitment to protect its interest in Syria is best represented in its intervention on the side of the regime starting in October 2015.<sup>46</sup> Originally, Russia claimed that its support of the Syrian regime was to face the security threat from Islamists and a possible spill over of those groups into the North Caucasus region.<sup>47</sup> This argument was not very convincing since it is hard for militants to spill over from one region to another separated by thousands of miles. Later in October 2015, Russia justified its intervention as an act of war against the Islamic State, but the truth is that Russian airstrikes have been targeting civilians and opposition groups who have had success in taking and holding regions from the Syrian army.<sup>48</sup>

In the Syrian coastal city of Tartous, Russia has its only naval base in the Mediterranean, and the facilities have been upgraded by Russian technicians.<sup>49</sup> The Mediterranean represents the old dream of imperial Russia to reach warm waters, and Russia's Putin is highly unlikely to let that dream disappear for it is crucial to utilize it at the domestic level for the regime's survival. After the fall of Saddam's regime in 2003 and that of Ghaddafi's Libya in 2011, Syria became the last remaining ally of Russia in the Arab world, and this zealous commitment to defend the Syrian regime is based on two assumptions: avoid the Iraqi and Libyan scenario where Russian interests were neglected in forming new regimes in these countries, and to use the Syrian card as a bargain chip to protect Russian interests in Ukraine. According to Robert Patman, Russia fears that a closer association between the EU and Ukraine could accelerate a democratic transition in Ukraine and have spill-over effects for the authoritarian regime in Moscow. Putin got involved in the Ukraine in 2014 because he feared that a democratic uprising in the Ukraine could have repercussions for Russia's political system.<sup>50</sup> Consequently, I believe that Russia's simultaneous intervention in Syria and Ukraine is to use the former as a bargain chip to prevent further connections between Ukraine and the EU. Moreover, with the list of allies growing thinner, preserving autocratic regimes and learning how to quell opposition movements is a survival strategy by the axis that includes Russia, China, Iran and other countries. This is best explained in Moises Naim thesis about dictatorships exchanging political technology to preserve authoritarian systems.

At the level of geopolitics, the Russians are using the Syrian crisis as a bargain chip to protect their interests in their immediate sphere. The Ukrainian crisis has put the Russian regime on high alert and on the defensive. Russia's economy is weakened, and its influence in Eastern Europe is waning. Whether the European Union or NATO are willing to expand or create a new order in Eastern Europe dissociated from Russia economically and politically, Putin knows that such scenarios will eventually have severe repercussions on Russian domestic affairs. A failure to preserve Russian power in Eastern Europe may destroy his image as a powerful and invincible leader. Hence, Putin can provide concessions in Syria in return for important gains in Ukraine.

Iran has provided its technical experience to the Syrian regime based on the events of the Green Revolution in 2009, and Russia is definitely learning from Syria's mistakes in dealing with the opposition, for one day Putin might face a similar situation and he needs to know how to react. Events in Syria provide a rich spectrum on autocratic survival for like-minded politicians and regimes.

Russia has economic interests worth twenty billion dollars which come from tourism, energy sector, and infrastructure.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, Syria depends on the Russian military, making it the seventh largest buyer of Russian military equipment in the last decade with 1.5 billion dollars' worth of military purchases.<sup>52</sup> It might be, too, that Russia is trying to block any attempt by Qatar to export natural gas to

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Europe by building a pipeline that passes through Syria, or perhaps Russia itself needs to have a friendly regime in Syria to build its own pipeline to the Middle East to diversify its supply. It is too early to analyse this point further, but eventually conflicting interest over natural resources will have a say in countries that tend to be a strategic passage for exporting-importing natural resources. Nevertheless, Russia's interests in Syria are more than an economic one; as Aleksandr Knovaloc describes it, Moscow's interests in Syria are less economic than political, for Russia is trying to secure its role in the shaping of a new Middle East.<sup>53</sup> But if this is the strategy Russia is following, then it is unlikely it will preserve its influence or interests in the region. Whether in 10 or 20 years, the Syrian regime will fall, and the country will not be as powerful as it used to be prior to the crisis. If Russia truly wanted to preserve its interests in the region, it would have aimed at neutrality or promoting its interest with the opposition. Russia's support for Syria is more political than economic, it is a matter of regime survival in Russia itself. Russia, Iran, Syria, North Korea, China and Venezuela are autocratic regimes. A regime change in one of these countries by a popular revolution is likely to inspire the population of the other countries to revolt. That is why, for instance, China has opted to block all sites that cover the uprisings in the Arab world, and Putin has spent a fair amount of time explaining to Obama how the Middle East survives with non-democratic regimes.<sup>54</sup> For Putin, this is a sacred alliance that may threaten the very heart of his own regime in Moscow. Just as Muhamad Olimat explains it, authoritarian regimes defend each other and support each other's agenda.<sup>55</sup>

Regarding China, its approach to the Syrian crisis is based on pragmatism. For example, 24 hours after China cast its veto in February 2012, a delegation from the Syrian National Committee for Democratic Change (a key Syrian opposition group) visited Beijing at the invitation of its foreign ministry.<sup>56</sup> This strategy was aimed at building China's image as a mediator rather than a partisan in the conflict.<sup>57</sup> Politically, Chinese interest resides in a prevention of a swift and impressive regime change by the Syrian opposition because such an action might encourage separatists in China. The provinces of Xingjian, Hong Kong and Tibet are inspired by separatists, and this threatens the stability of the Chinese regime,<sup>58</sup> because if one province separates, China is likely to disintegrate. Needless to say, the more the conflict is prolonged, the more China can learn from Syria's experience in quelling uprisings.

China's concern in the Syrian conflict is not only based on domestic purposes, it also has to do with American alliances in East Asia, an area which China has come to perceive as its immediate sphere. Taiwan, Japan, and smaller countries in East Asia are part of the American sphere of influence bordering China. Taiwan is aligned with the U.S, but China has historical claims over the island; Japan and China have historical enmity and are engaged in a diplomatic struggle regarding the sovereignty over a group of small islands between the two countries. It is unclear whether the U.S will intervene to mediate or arbitrate between China and Japan regarding the dispute in the South China sea, or whether it will accept China's swallowing of Taiwan. Hence, China also perceives the Syrian conflict as a bargaining chip to promote its geopolitical interests in East Asia. According to Mordechai Chaziza, China's policy in the Syrian crisis is influenced by the soft balancing strategy. Pape defines soft balancing strategy as being an action that challenges U.S military preponderance indirectly by the use of non-military tools which aims at frustrating, and undermining aggressive unilateral U.S military policies.<sup>59</sup> By using the power of veto and opening up to the Syrian opposition, Beijing is trying to undermine the U.S whilst avoiding military conflict and at the same time it is keeping an eye on its immediate sphere. Minor influence in

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Syria can be transformed into strong gains in East Asia by forcing the Americans to accept Chinese predominance in East Asia over Japan, Taiwan and other countries.

### *The United States*

The U.S. does not have a comprehensive policy towards the Middle East in general and Syria in particular. When the Syrian uprising against Asad began in 2011, Obama asked the Syrian President to step down. However, the U.S. has not shown any sign of intervention in Syria against Asad's forces to stop the bloodshed. The American policy towards Syria is based on a diplomatic approach where the "Friends of Syria" group was established and includes Arab and Western countries who oppose Asad.<sup>60</sup> Besides this diplomatic pressure, the U.S. and the West in general imposed economic sanctions on the Asad regime in an attempt to break the regime.<sup>61</sup> In addition, Obama's administration is being too idealistic in trying to manage the Syrian crisis through the UN. The Asad regime is being supported economically and militarily by Iranians and Russians, and it is a brutal regime that perceives international relations from the hard - not the soft - power perspective. Thus, American emphasis on economic sanctions will only empower the regime as it will force citizens to depend on the Syrian state to receive welfare and primary material for survival. Moreover, the approach for regime change by soft power or coercive diplomacy is an extremely fragile policy in the Middle East. Saddam's Iraq and the Iranian regime have survived economic sanctions, and North Korea has been surviving sanctions for decades. Dictatorships understand politics by tangible power, not by soft power.

It is understandable that America is still suffering from the consequences of the Afghan and Iraqi war launched in the last decade. Hence, it is not enthusiastic about initiating an international alliance against Asad without a U.N. mandate, but recent proclamations by Secretary of State John Kerry about the need to talk to Asad as a means of pursuing a solution to the crisis<sup>62</sup> raises doubts about America's credibility. Moreover, the U.S. need not send troops to overthrow Asad; the West and the U.S. can provide important lethal weapons to the opposition and with essential training for their military units.

It is clear that the U.S. under Obama has been more interested in reaching a nuclear deal with the Iranians rather than stopping bloodshed in Syria or elsewhere. This priority is perceived by the Russians and Iranians as a sign of weakness which encourages them to support the Asad regime. The lack of a firm American policy regarding Syria has emboldened Iran, Russia, and China to pursue their own interests in Syria. The American administration has also neglected the danger of prolonging the war; at the regional level, the fighting in Syria is perceived as a Sunni-Shiite conflict. The deeper segmentation and antagonism between Sunnis and Shiites across the Muslim World threatens stability in countries that have substantial Sunni and Shiite communities, like Lebanon, Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen, Kuwait and Bahrain.

### *Conclusion*

The two layers of conflict in Syria, the regional-religious dimension and a realpolitik-international dimensions are closely related. The Shiite bloc and its alliance with the Russian-Chinese axis demonstrates the overlapping interest of like-minded regimes that are based on authoritarian principles. It is likely that China might step out of the Russian-Iranian axis if its regional interests are met in East Asia, or if it finds that its economic interests are secured in a post-Asad regime. However, one cannot



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expect that China will join an anti-Asad coalition, but it can be expected that it will take a neutral stance in the future. Iranian and Russian perspectives towards the crisis are based on the need to support like-minded regimes which provide a safe path for their interests in the Levant. Asad's recent comments on the need of Russia to preserve its influence in the Middle East in order to create a balance of power with the West can be framed within this context.<sup>63</sup>

As for the Turkish-GCC-American axis, it is an alliance that is dependent on the U.S. with the latter being reluctant to take a bold initiative. For those who argue that the GCC countries are also authoritarian regimes whose interest lies in aligning with other dictatorships, their claim is wrong. This is not to say that they are democratic, but the GCC countries represent a social contract based on a rentier state whereby the state shares the wealth of the nation abundantly in return for political obedience. Its rationale is completely different from that of Russia and Iran. The American administration is trying to promote Iran as a regional power at the expense of Saudi Arabia, which will definitely lead to further conflicts in the region. Saudi Arabia perceives the crisis in Syria as a Shiite threat to the Sunni order led by the GCC, but the efforts of the GCC are still limited, along with the Turkish efforts due to their overdependence on American action. Nevertheless, it is likely that when an American initiative regarding Syria is put into action, Turkey and Saudi Arabia will manage their differences to contain the Shiite influence. It can be said that a new Persian Empire is rising, and due to Arab inactivity with respect to the Syrian crisis, it is more likely that it will collide with the Neo-Ottomanists in Turkey.

Any resolution in Syria that does not take into account the Sunni-Shiite balance of power at the regional level is likely to be sabotaged in the long run. It is important to find a common ground between the regional and international dimensions. A solution which is internationally supported but with regional reservations is unlikely to survive, and vice-versa. Ironically, while all parties are witnessing heavy losses in their interests in Syria, only Israel stands in triumph. Without any sort of intervention, the Syrian army has been destroyed, the prospect of a strong state on its northern border is eliminated, Hezbollah, Israel's archenemy is losing its best fighters in Syria, hence weakening its ability to fight the Israeli army. Moreover, the Sunni-Shiite struggle in the region gives Israel an indirect assurance that its borders are secure because the regional powers are busy fighting themselves.

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<sup>5</sup> Obaida Fares, "The Arab Spring Comes...", 148

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